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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses kinds and characteristics of language play, explores the relationship of such play to wider domains of language and play, and speculates on the possible contributions of language play for language mastery and cognitive development. Jump rope chants and ritual insults ("Off my case, potato face") and other expressive language use by children indicate that children have a particularly keen metalingual awareness. They play with the sound, syntax and semantic dimensions of words ("He is sinking-up the rock"). Salient features of language play are regular cadence, repetitiveness and symmetrical pattern. When children have developed the ability to take the perspective of others, they can invent verbal games with explicit rules. Language play gives pleasure, provides practice in handling words, and facilitates mastery of the syntax of language. Through playing with language children verify the reality of language and confirm their knowledge of objects and events. Word play provides children with opportunities to structure experience and order reality by imposing rules on it. While systematic studies of language play are rare, it has been suggested that language play may contribute to later success in reading and writing. Teachers may support very young children's play with language by indirect methods. Later, tongue twisters, puns, pictographs, cryptograms and typographical poetry may be introduced in a classroom atmosphere which supports word play. (Author/RH)

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LANGUAGE PLAY

Judy I. Schwartz

Listen to them. They are all around you -- children playing with language. They experiment with its rhythms and cadences. They mix up its meanings and change its patterns. Children play with language to poke fun at the world and to verify their grasp of reality. They use language as a safe buffer for the expression of anger. Sometimes the play is part of the oral tradition and is passed from one generation to the next. Jump rope chants are of this genre:

I won't go to Macy's
Any more, more, more.
There's a big, fat policeman
At the door, door, door,
He'll catch you by the collar,
And make you pay a dollar.
So I won't go to Macy's
Any more, more, more.

Iona and Peter Opie (1959) have recorded the remarkable consistency over space and time of such street games in Britain. Sometimes the play is in the form of a dialogue. The play format enables the safe expression of insults. Such exchanges are similar to the "play faces" observed in non-human primates which signal that although the following behavior may contain aggressive or sexual characteristics, it is to be taken only as a simulation, a game. This example comes from two eight-year-olds:

1st child: Off my case, potato face

2nd child: In your lip, potato chip
Up your nose with a rubber hose

1st child: That don't rhyme, Frankenstein
I'm the boss, applesauce

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Much of language play, however, is more spontaneous and fleeting. This comes from a 4½ year old:

Put a tic tac in your mouth
Put a lic lac in your house
Put a zic zac in your fouse
Put a cric crac in your bouse

And this from a five-year old:

I'm gonna telly 'cause
You put jelly in my belly
And made me smelly

Are adults immune from language play? Certainly not. Writers of prose and poetry play with language as part of their trade. In the hands of Ogden Nash even the lowly pun can be, if not sublime, then at least ascendedent:

THE COBRA

This creature fills its mouth with venum
And walks upon its duodenum.
He who attempts to tease the cobra
Is sooner a sadder he andsobra.

(Nash, 1973, p. 43).

But one does not need to be a gifted writer to have this kind of fun. Take, for example, the classic "Who's on First" comedy routine of Abbot and Costello in which the baseball players' names, Who, What, Why and Where create havoc and humor in the dialogue:

1st speaker: Who's on first.
2nd speaker: What.
1st speaker: No, what's on second.
Who's on first?

More recently the comedy team of Bob and Ray rejuvenated this kind of amusing banter with a commercial for the new ME (acronym for microwave and electric) range.

1st speaker: Anything you want cooked, me will do it
2nd speaker: You?
1st speaker: No, Me.

Of course, sometimes such play is reduced to the banal. Here is a leaden example from a Washington's Birthday sale advertised on radio:

1st speaker: You can purchase the _____
At the price you ax for.
2nd speaker: By George, he's got a point.

Why is language play so ubiquitious? Probably because it permits the free and safe operation of imagination. A child can explore, hypothesize, test, verify and practice with language and, in the process, master language. In this paper I will discuss the kinds and characteristics of language play, explore the relationship of such play to the domains of both language and play, and speculate on the possible contributions of language play for language mastery and cognitive development. For the purposes of this discussion, language play is defined as:

a) The object of play itself in which children playfully manipulate language forms (sound, structure, meaning); and

b) The accompaniment to play activity as when children recreate or invent imaginative sequences.

Kinds and Characteristics of Language Play

Language has many functions. Probably most basic of all, as Langer (1955) points out, is its role in reflection. Language helps to make experience amenable to the workings of thought and imagination. But humans are social beings and the need to convey thought

and feeling to others is pressing. Thus, a primary function of language is communication. Yet, in language playthis function is forfeited. In its place the child substitutes a playful manipulation of verbal forms. The child concentrates on the language itself and ignores meaningful communication, In a sense, language becomes opaque for the child as she attends to it directly. The child concentrates on the sounds, meanings and patterns of the language, and manipulates them. When communication is the objective, however, the language forms themselves ane not immediately accessible; they are ignored and language becomes transparent. Meta-language means speaking about language. The term metalinguistic awareness is used to describe the ability to make language forms opaque and attend to them in and for themselves (Cazden, 1974). Children seem to have a particularly keen metalingual awareness. All of their experience is susceptible to play, and language is no exception. This fact is verified through our incidental observa - tions, anecdotal accounts and empirical evidence. Let us look at how children play with language.

SOUND PLAY

Harriet Johnson's directorship of an experimental nursery school for children from 14 to 36 months over half a century ago gave her many first-hand opportunities to observe language play. She concluded that, "Children make . . . language reactions which seem to be responses to language itself. They experiment with words they hear used, with their uses and meanings, with time relations . . . with words indicating causal relationships,

with number, with sentence structure, and with verb forms. These experiments are not really concerned with meaning, value and use but with rhythm, with sound and with form" (1928, p. 114). Her children would compose brief repetitive chants which they would use to accompany some motor activity:

Munna munna mo
munna munna mo

Now it's done un un
Done un un un un

Other evidence substantiates Johnson's conclusions. Most language play is sound play. Ruth Weir (1962) taperecorded her 2½ year old son's presleep monologues as he lay in his crib, Anthony would repeat and play with sounds which were rhythmic and alliterative. For example, one sequence was

Babette
Back here
Wet

Babette was the name of a very brief acquaintance so its repetition probably had less to do with psychological association than with the phonological appeal of the syllables. The second line begins with the alliterating /b/, and the first and last lines rhyme. Another example Weir cites is

Daddy dance

She rejects this as a sample of play with meaning because it is an unlikely imperative, and because each syllable commences with the same consonant /d/, and the first and third syllables have the same vowel (short a) phoneme.

A study by Schwartz (1977) which analyzed 149 samples of language play from children aged 6 months to 10 years corroborated Weir's anecdotal findings. Most of the language play consisted of manipulations of phonemic elements and the prosodic features of of pitch, stress and juncture. The sequences were marked by a very regular beat:

Doobie doo
Doobie doo
Doobie doo (2 years)

La la la
Lol li pop
La la la (6 years)
Lol li pop

The regularity of rhythm persisted, in some cases, even in dialogues. This is an example in which X is 4 years old and Y is 10:

X	Y
Where you goin?	To the store
Why you goin?	To get milk
How you goin?	I'm walking
When you goin?	Right now
When I'm goin?	You're not going.
	I can't take you

Samples collected from infants 6 to 18 months old revealed a manipulation of pitch, stress and juncture which approximated American English pitch contour. As would be expected, the older the child the more meaningful were the verbal elements incorporated into the sound play. For example, contrast this example from a 2½ year old

Oopu oopu ockie
Oopu oopu Yockie
Oopu oopu ockie
Oopu oopu ockie

with this from a 6 year old

Ramona has a phona
Ramone has a phona
Mikey has a bikey
Mikey has a bikey

Other changes in sound play which Schwartz found with increasing age were a higher incidence of consonants, polysyllabic words and consonant clusters. These trends are consistent with the child's growing mastery over phonological features of the language. As the child masters new sounds they are incorporated into his play with sound. This is quite typical of play behavior in general.

PATTERN PLAY

Pattern play or play with the structure or syntax of the language occupies the next place in the order of frequency of types of language play. Weir's (1962) data revealed a high incidence of what she calls grammatical practice. Because of its strong resemblance to the kind of pattern drill encountered in foreign language instruction, Weir believes that this kind of language play functions as a systematic exercise. This is often accomplished by the selection of a grammatical pattern in which substitution occurs in one slot of the grammatical frame. The words substituted are usually of the same form class or they are pronouns substituted for nouns. The selection within the form class can be made on the basis of sound or meaning associations. Here is one of Weir's examples of noun substitution:

What color
What color blanket
What color map
What color glass

The first line is the frame of the pattern. The full pattern occurs in the second line. Lines 3 and 4 repeat the pattern with different nouns substituted in each line. Although technically monologues; Weir found that the recorded passages bore many of the characteristics of a dialogue in which the child was both student and teacher, becoming his own interlocutor, modeling responses and correcting himself.

There is the light
Where is the light
Here is the light

Schwartz (1977) also found much pattern play in her data. In almost every instance of pattern play, even where nonsense words comprised part of the sequence, the word order conformed to standard English syntax.

Mine mine mine
Fine fine fine
Mine doll
Mine ball (18 months)

You hungy,. dogie, domy
You a hungy bungy
(3 years)

Mac can do what?
Mac ca do - Mac ca do
Hey Sandra
What can Mac do
Mac can doo, doo, doo
Mac can do you (6 years)

Watch the knicks
Beat the picks
Hear the ticks
Likety splits
Hickety lips (8 years)

The short redundant quality of a linguistic pattern drill was very evident in the data:

My eyes
My nose
My ears
My neck
My mouth (2½ years)

Hit it
Sit it
Put it
Sit it
Frit it (5 years)
Slit it
Mit it

I got a car
I got a jar
I got a bar
I got a nar (6 years
I got a par

Some of these brief utterances incorporate features of the telegraphic speech of the two-and three-year-old which Braine (1963) described as pivot and X words. Pivot words are constantly repeated in either the initial or final position.

X words comprise all of the other words the child uses but appear less frequently than pivots. Some examples cited by Braine are allgone egg, allgone watch, allgone lettuce, and bye-bye plane, bye-bye man, bye-bye hot.

MEANING PLAY

Kornei Chukovsky (1963), a Russian writer, delighted in collecting samples of what he considered to be the linguistic genius of children between 2 and 5 years old. Perhaps the most interesting of these were the "topsy-turvies" in which the child inverted the natural order of phenomena and thereby distorted meaning. The incongruity of this kind of meaning play is shown in the examples. Chukovsky cites from his own child who invented a game of mismatching sounds to animals -- doggie - meow, rooster-bow-wow, and the like.

Chukovsky notes how Russian folk rhyme for children is filled with deliberate inversions of the real and unreal. He illustrates this with distortions found on the theme of riding a horse. In some instances an unusual animal is substituted for the horse so you have riding a beetle or riding a sheep. There are examples in which adjectives are interchanged as in "He rode a dappled wagon" or "Tied to a wooden horse." Roles may be reversed as in this example "The village rode past the peasant." Or, the rider's poaition is reversed as in

"He sat with his back to the front
As he rode off to the hunt."

The presentation of objects in a deliberately incorrect juxtapositiion, the interchange of the functions of objects and the

ascribing of incongruous functions to objects seem to be universal features of folk literature. Chukovsky believes that when these kinds of reality distortions occur spontaneously in children's language play, they function to verify the child's knowledge of reality. Such play occurs only after the child has mastered a skill or knowledge. At that point, the reverse juxtaposition of things becomes amusing. It serves to confirm what the child already knows to be the real order of things.

Meaning play occurs less frequently than either sound or structure play. Schwartz found 10 clear examples of it in her data. Most of these were produced by children over 5 years old. Sometimes the child reflected overtly on the process of manipulating word meanings.

San Diego, Sandiego, Sandi Ego
San Diego, Sandi ego (4 years)
Eggs aren't sandy !

Here the child's play with the sound of the words resulted in a change of meaning.

In other cases, the child invented a word to describe a particular phenomenon. For example, this child drew a picture consisting of many hearts. He asked the student teacher to label it as follow:

This is a very hearty story. (6½ years)

Other words were invented to describe an experience for which the child had not yet acquired an appropriate label. This dialogue occurred between two 6 year olds during a twenty-minute experience with floating and sinking objects:

1at child	This sponge is up I can make it sink I can make it sink up Here's a rock It won't sink up by itself
2nd child	Sink-up rock Sink-up
Teacher	What did you discover?
2nd child	He is sinking-up the rock
1st child	It won't sink-up by itself

Up is affixed to the verb sink in lieu of the word float. Such concoctions reveal both a linguistic and a conceptual agility.

Another dialogue in which the first child is 7 and the second is 5 also incorporated an invented word. In this case the word clinks was used to describe a bicycle chain. Though the word is invented its correct inflected form (as in the case of sinking-up in the prior example) shows conformity to standard English grammar:

1st child	The clinks go around here
2nd child	Push this clink up
1st child	I'll fix this clink

VERBAL GAMES

Vygotsky (1976) characterizes developmental changes in children's play as follows: "The development from an overt imaginary situation and covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation outlines the evolution of children's play from one pole to the other" (p. 543). Language play appears to follow

a similar pattern. First there is the kind of play, which in addition to being pleasurable, whose goal appears to be mastery. The child produces a language form, modifies it, substitutes another for it and repeats it over and over. Piaget (1957) linked this kind of practice play to the sensorimotor period of cognitive development. Then there is symbolic play in which language is embedded more meaningfully into the play activity. Coinciding with Piaget's concrete operational stage of cognitive development (the stage of games and rules) children beginto play verbal games. Verbal games are distinguished from verbal play in that they contain rules which are transmitted from one player to another. Pig Latin is an example.

Many verbal games are similar to the ritualized chants and rhymes which the Opies (1959) collected. In such instances there is either minimal or no evidence of individual variation.

Johnny win the ocean
Johnny win the sea
Johnny broke a bottle
And blame it on me.
Sister told mom
Mom told pa
Johnny win whipping and
Ha Ha ha! (5 years)

Here are two variations of the same chant

Jingle bells
Batman smells
Robin laid an egg
The batmobile lost a wheel
The comitonger broke his leg (5 years)

Jingle bells
Batman smells
Robin laid an egg (6½ years)
The batmobile has lost its wheel
And the Riddler got away
Hey!

An older child is more likely to invent a verbal game than a younger child. This example comes from a ten-year-old:

> If I say a name and later on during the game you say it, you're out. Like, if I say Alice and then you say Alice, you're out.

Invented verbal games require sufficient socialization in the participants to enable them to take eachother's needs and viewpoints into account. Note in the latter example how the child not only defined the rule but illustrated it for further clarification.

SALIENT FEATURES OF LANGUAGE PLAY

Regardless of which form language play takes, it is characterized throughout by several salient features. First, examples of language play appear to have a strong, regular cadence. A child doesn't say as much as chant or almost sing examples of language play. This quality is particularly noticeable when the play accompanies some motor activity. A four-year-old in the dramatic play area will repeat rhythmically

up and down
in and out
up and down
in and out

as she pretends to scrub clothes against a washboard.

Interestingly, chants of a heavily rhythmic, almost stylized nature are used in many cultures to accompany actual work. Rhythm is basic to life - it is present in the cycles of the seasons, the phases of the moon, the periodicity of human functions. Quite naturally then the inherent rythmicity of both language and movement unite in play.

Rhythm is allied to a second feature of language play, its repetitiveness. Often the elements are repeated are those that are most rhythmic. This is particularly evident in pattern play, as noted earlier, where substitutions are often made on the basis of rhyme:

sit it
hit it
mit it , and so on.

Repetition is also used in the verbal play dialogue. Sometimes the repetition is exact as in this example between a father (X) and his three-year-old child (Y) as cited by McTear (1978):

X	Y
You've got a banana	You got a nana

However, the repetition can be varied as in this instance in which the child seeks to control the situation.

X	Y
You're going up to bed now.	I not going up to bed

Ritual insults incorporate this kind of repetition. Changes in inflection carry the meaning from one speaker to the other as the insult is bounced back and forth.

X	Y
You're dumb	You're dumb

Such exchanges are made within a context of nonverbal signs such as laughter, pointing, assuming a challenging position, and generally exaggerated gestures all of which signal the play nature of the exchanges. Through such cues the participants signal their knowledge that the proposition which is the subject of the insult is not true. The exchange is therefore buffered from reality and negative consequences.

Garvey (1976) defines three stages in this kind of social play of children from 3½ to 5½ years of age. First there is simple repetition of the kind just illustrated. The next stage is called paradigmatic substitution. This involves a substitution in the second participant's response from the same form class. The third stage consists of syntagmatic substitution in which a term which has some linear or sequential relation to the first class is substituted from a different form class. To illustrate:

	X	Y
Simple Repetition:	You're dumb	You're dumb
Paradigmatic Substitution:	You're dumb	You're stupid
Syntagmatic Substitution:	You're dumb	No I'm not

A third feature of language play is also closely allied to the other two, rythm and repetition. This is the symmetrical pattern which appears in much of the play even when it is a

monologue. Weir (1962) found that Anthony's longer sequences of language play which she termed paragraphs had a somewhat circular, rondo-like construction. They ended often as they began. Repetition and rythm not only characterize the smaller elements within a larger play sequence, they are also evident in the overall structure. Here is an example:

One two three four
One two
One two three four
One two three
Anthony counting
Good boy you
One two three

This kind of symmetrical construction is naturally even more apparent in dialogue between two children. Garvey (1976) analyzes verbal play dialogues by their turn-taking characteristics. She uses the formula noted earlier to describe each kind of turn: simple repetition, paradigmatic substitution and syntagmatic substitution. Such sequences are built up into rounds. A <u>round</u> is a repeatable unit of interaction. Here are three rounds cited by Garvey which illustrate the characteristic of symmetry.

	<u>X</u>	<u>Y</u>
1.	Bye, mommy Bye, mommy	Bye, mommy Bye, mommy
2.	Bye, mommy Bye, mommy	Bye, daddy Bye, daddy
3.	Hello, my name is Mr. Donkey	Hello, my name is Mr. Elephant
	Hello, my name is Mr. Tiger	Hello, my name is Mr. Lion

In the following example, there is an asymmetrical pattern of turn-taking. X has more turns than Y.

X	Y
I have to go to work.	You're already at work
No I'm not	
I have to go to school	You're already at school
No, I'm not.	

Another feather of these verbal play dialogues is also subject to the factor of symmetry. Role assignment can be symmetrical as in the last four examples in which the individuals maintained their roles throughout. Or, role assignment can be asymmetrical as in this example in which the roles are reversed at the beginning of the second round.

X	Y
I'll be the dragon and you be St. George that killed him	(Shoots the dragon X)
(falls dead)	Now I'll be the dragon
(shoots Y, the dragon)	Do it again, I'm not dead
(shoots again)	(falls dead)

This latter example illustrates another characteristic of this kind of social play. A turn or round can be interrupted for clarification of rules or discussion of procedures (i.e., I'll be_____, you be____) and then resumed with no apparent break in the continuity of the play.

Turn-taking and symmetry in language play are indicative of its underlying communicative function. Conversation is a

reciprocal act. It is a patterning back and forth of language of language between the parties. It seems then that the child is practicing more than how the integral elements of the language - its sound, syntax and meaning - are put together. The child is also practicing how to use language as a social tool. Actually, the child begins to learn about the structure of conversation from earliest infancy. The newborn begins to pick up the subtle and complex system of verbal and nonverbal cues which govern interpersonal communication. By the second day of life, the infant moves rhythmically to an adult's speech (Condon and Sander, (1974). At two months the rudiments of conversational sequencing can be observed in the infant and mother's verbal exchanges (Bateson, 1971). Before speaking its first word the infant engages in a prelinguistic communication expressed via gestures, pointing, the use of supports to pull objects closer, and the like (Bates, Camioni and Volterra, 1975). In early childhood then, the child extends and refines her mastery of the rules of communication through social play.

FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE PLAY

PLEASURE

One of the most obvious functions of language play is the pleasure it gives the participant. Descriptions of play behavior in general invariably include as a characteristic its voluntary, self-initiated quality (Huizinga,1955). Garvey (1977) notes that repetitive, rythmic vocalizations are associated with pleasurable

states in the prelinguistic child. Congenitally deaf infants with deaf parents begin to babble about the same time as hearing infants. But the deaf infants stop babbling after a certain period of time. This indicates that babbling is probably a genetically programmed behavior which is triggered by maturation. However, without the reinforcing influence of hearing its own voice, the infant is not motivated to continue to produce such vocalizations.

Children are initiated into the role of language in play behavior from earliest infancy. They learn about it through the playful game-like interactions they engage in with parents and other caregivers. For example, the parent will loom closer and closer to the baby and then back away and make swelling sounds, exaggerated, "ooohs" and "aaahs" as he is doing so. Or the mother might click her tongue to accompany tickling, finger walking or jiggling the baby. These vocal bouts are inevitably met with smiles and gurgles of pleasure from the baby who anticipates more. When the child starts to produce language she continues these playful vocal interactions. For example, the peek-a-boo game may include a verbal component such as "I see you." Mother may say "I see you" as her face reappears from behind a pillow. The toddler might echo "See you". With increasing language facility, more language is incorporated into play behavior in the ways we have discussed earlier. Vocalization

in the human child is a naturally occurring phenomenon. When it is embedded in a context of strong, positive feelings, language play prospers and develops. In early childhood language provides increasing pleasure to the child through the control it provides in social play. Later still the ability to master rules involved in verbal games conveys still more pleasure.

PRACTICE

A second function of language play is practice. A typical formula of practice play in general is practice equals power equals pride. A child has recently acquired, for example, the ability to climb the monkey bars on the school playground. He is shaky and somewhat hesitant, not quite sure-footed at first. Every spare moment he has, he can be found climbing the monkey bars. His movements become more skilled. Gradually he develops a motor sequence in which inefficient and random movements are replaced by a rhythmic and graceful pattern of ascending and descending the bars. He practices this over and over again with obvious pride. "Look at me; look what I've accomplished! It's written all over his face and the way he holds himself.

This practice equals power equals pride is also part of language play, although it is usually not as noticeable. In solitary play the child takes apart and puts together the building blocks of language. So regular and persistent is this kind of practice that Weir (1962) likened it to a pattern drill. In social play children again are practicing but this time it is with

the conventions of social interchange. Such interchange is governed by a complex and subtle system of procedures, mutual expectations about content and sequence, and rules for regulating exchanges. In the dialogues of social play children experiment with this system and acquire a degreee of mastery over it. Garvey (1977) reminds us that the child learns most of what he knows about the rules for conversing through the first-hand experience of interacting with others in a variety of situations including play situations. She cites a number of examples of the conventions of conversation which children practice with in play. What they actually do is to violate the convention. One such convention, called an invitation question, proceeds as follows: respond to a question or assertion concerning your own state or experience as an invitation to contribute to the conversation. Thus, if someone says to you, "I understand you just came back from a very exciting vacation," you are expected to expand on this topic in your response. Children play with this convention by violating it. In this example one partner repeatedly questions and the other answers but refuses to elaborate.

X	Y
Is that your hat?	(Puts on fireman's hat) Yeah
Did you get it from school?	Nope
From here?	Nope.
Where? In the car?	Um, no.
From you?	No.
From in the...other room?	No. Yes.

There is another attribute of practice play which is also present in language play. Let us use another analogy from motor development: stairclimbing. When a child first learns how to climb stairs she will practice this skill over and over many, many times until it is refined and accomplished. Then the child will introduce elaborations into the basic stair-climbing skill. She will not only climb upstairs, she will climb down. She may climb sideways, or backwards even. She will grasp the hand-rail with just one hand, then she may put her other hand over her first as if to pull herself up the stairs. Then she may climb without holding the handrail at all. Finally, having acquired sufficient mastery over stairclimbing, the skill will no longer be used as an activity in and of itself, but as a way of accomplishing something else. Stairclimbing acquires instrumental value. This sequence occurs in language play too. Every aspect of language play discussed in this paper shows an interest first in practice of the forms themselves, the introduction of elaborations on the basic forms as in the example of the violation of a conversational convention, and the use of the language behavior as a tool in some other activity. We hypothesize that pattern play contributes to mastery over the syntax of language. The child begins to comprehend and produce increasingly complex syntactical structures so that by school-age he has mastered the basic structure of the language. He continues to use his mastery over syntax but less as an object of play itself, and more as a

tool of play in his social exchanges with peers.

VERIFICATION OF REALITY

Sutton-Smith (1967) notes an interesting contrast in children's cognitive and imaginative development. He says that in play children are able to conserve imaginative identities of play objects and events by resisting contra-indicative stimuli. They are able to maintain an "as if" sttitude despite all kinds of interferences. A group of children will persist in pretending that a mound of blocks set upon each other in a particular configuration is an airplane hangar. They disregard the fact that the construction looks as much like any number of other buildings as it does a hangar. It remains for them an airplane hangar even if it is partially knocked down or other children remove some of its blocks for a completely different building project, Sutton-Smith says that paradoxically the factor which prevents children from conservation of class, identities appears to be the very stimulus-bondedness which they are able to ignore in their play.

The persistance of an "as if" attitude in play is particularly evident when children role play. First the child will play a specific person such as her own mother, and later will assume in play a more generalized role such as housewife. It is generally acknowledged that part of the function of such play is to help the child learn about various social roles, to

experiment with them, and to verify what the child knows of them. This occurs in language play too. Chukovsky's (1963) "topsie-turvies" discussed earlier are the most obvious examples. Once a child has knowledge of the real order of things, she begins to enjoy the make-believe of the "topsie-turvies." She confirms the real by distorting it. This phenomenon is analagous to what Freud (1960) called the "sense in nonsense" of the joke. The distortions which occur in language play whether in the inventions of words or the violation of the social conventions of discourse do not destroy or even damage the language. On the contrary, the integrity of the language is maintained throughout the child's manipulations with it. Sense is always embedded in the nonsense, and the child enjoys rediscovering the familiar or the conventional or the correct, by adult standards, as she plays.

In language play the child verifies two realities. First, he verifies the reality of language. His play with the structure of language serves as a linguistic exercise in which he reconfirms what he knows about language. Second, when language play involves manipulation of meaning the child confirms his knowledge of reality. Many of the rhymes, chants and games which are part of child folklore are filled with the incongruities and juxtapositions of meaning play. Once an object or event becomes familiar it is fair game for play. By stretching

and distorting reality the child can trace a path back to the unknown. But it is a safe excursion because the territory is familiar and the way back is easy to find.

CONTROL OVER EXPERIENCE

Language and play are akin by virtue of their rule-bound natures. Each has a syntax which governs its operations. Bruner (1976) describes two crucial formal patterns of language. One consists of a function and its arguments; the other, an argument and the functions into which it can fit. Likewise, a ball or stick are fitted into as many acts as possible, or an act such as climbing is performed on as many objects to which it can be applied appropriately. This pattern is close to one of the universal structures of language, predication, which is organized by topic and comment.

John has a hat
John is a man
John jumps over the fence

or

Toss the hat
Wear the hat
Lose the hat

Because of these parallels between language and play, Bruner hypothesizes that play might be a major precursor to the emergence of language and symbolic behavior in the higher primates and humans. Chomsky (1957) argued that humans possess an innate capacity for language, a language acquisition device, as McNeill (1970) termed it. But is it specifically language that the human brain is so

specially attuned to? Language may be just one manifestation of this capacity. One can hypothesize that it is the ability to structure experience, to order reality by imposing rules on it which is the specifically unique human capacity. In essence, all of experience is bound by the rules of one human grammar or another - whether it is law, or history, or art, or economics or language. If experience can be made to conform to rules, then experience becomes to some extent, predictable. To be able to predict experience is to be able to exert a measure of control over it.

Play behavior in general and language play specifically are also bound by rules. No matter how spontaneous the play may appear, it is nonetheless governed by rules. Vygotsky (1976) tells us that there is no such thing as play without rules. The tension which is often part of play may arise out of the conflict between the rules of the game and what the child would do if she could act spontaneously. In play as elsewhere rules bring control. Although they limit the range of activity and reduce options, rules also reduce the unpredictability of chance occurrence.

The ritualistic character of play behavior also serves to control experience. Erikson (1977) says that one use of playfulness throughout life is the ritualization of experience. Ritualistic behavior is behavior which is not specifically

adapted to external circumstances. Here is an example given by Piaget (1957). Each time his infant daughter was bathed she stroked her hair and splashed the water. Even though the hair stroking was irrelevant to the effect of hand hitting the water, it was a necessary part of the whole act and was repeated in each instance. Why was it repeated? Why do children go through a whole series of sometimes elaborate procedures in their play which have no adaptive function? Why is it important to avoid stepping on the cracks in the pavement, or to twirl a child round three times in Blind Man's Bluff, or to recite incantations in their language play? Possibly because rituals signal quite clearly an initiation into the play act. The more complex the ritual the more clearly does its evocation indicate membership in the play group. In addition, rituals are composed of rules too, but theirs are special rules not related in any simple or linear way to reality. Conformity to the rules of the ritual bestows not a logical control over reality but a magical control. Rituals govern via an emotional logic not a rational logic. In the mind of the player, however, control over experience by ritual is equally as valid as control by reason.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Are there any implications for teaching from this discussion of language play. First, it is important to note that, surprisingly, language play has been the subject of very little research.

Linguists have made passing comments on it for at least 50 years, and educators such as Harriet Johnson have left anecdotal accounts. But serious and systematic study of language play is rare. All children seem to engage in some language play particularly at the earliest stages, but there appear to be wide differences among children in language play behavior thereafter. What accounts for these differences is not known. Thus, conclusions on applications must be drawn cautiously. They must be made in the manner of speculations rather than on the basis of known causal or correlational relationships. Using the data on play in general as analagous to language play can help provide some guidelines.

In his influential book, Thought and language, Vygotsky (1962) made the point that literacy depends on and contributes to making previously unconscious or tacit knowledge, conscious. Cazden (1974) has hypothesized that the metalinguistic practice of language play does this very thing. It makes the language forms opaque, susceptible to manipulation by the child's conscious mind and, by so doing, contributes to later success in reading and writing. This is an interesting but, as yet, unsubstantiated hypothesis. I think we need to proceed very cautiously here. Many of us are quite familiar with preschool language programs designed around pattern practice, drill and reinforcement. Though they do not go under the rubric of play it would not be difficult to market something of this kind as a language play program. At last someone would have found a way to make play pay!

Should we teach children to play with language? My immediate response to this question is NO. I am reminded of the psychologist who wanted to get his daughter to stop playing with dolls. He succeeded by teaching her how to play with them! On reflection, I will qualify my no to the question. The answer depends upon what you mean by teach, and when you intend to do the teaching. We know from Smilansky's (1968) work that adult intervention can enhance children's play behavior. I think what form the intervention assumes should be guided by Vygotsky's (1976) outline cited earlier, of play development. When language play consists of overt imaginary situations with covert rules the teacher or caregiver's role should consist of supporting the play by indirect methods. This means providing a situation which encourages language play. To cite a simple example, instead of hushing a group of pre-schoolers who have begun to chant spontaneously, reinforcing it. What form the reinforcement takes can vary :an encouraging smile from the teacher, or a word or two of appreciation afterwards, or tape recording the chant to be replayed for the children's pleasure later on. Another way a teacher or caregiver can enhance language play is to make the many samples of language play from literature a regular part of the children's experience. If the adult delights in such "sense in nonsense" the children will be encouraged to continue with their own language play.

When children have reached the period of development where

play consists of games with overt rules and covert imaginary situations, the teacher's role can be more direct. There are many delightful ways to play with both oral and written forms of language when such play becomes more self-conscious and explicit. There are tongue twisters, puns and conundrums, pictographs and cryptograms, typographical poetry, and much more. Moffett and Wagner (1976) include an excellent chapter on this topic in their book, Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K - 13. The teacher's role in this kind of language play is less subtle and more overt than it was earlier. She must continue to create an atmosphere which supports play. But now, in addition, she will teach ways to play with language. She will guide the children as they experiment and intervene, when necessary, with suggestions and assistance.

While we cannot, as yet, attribute language growth to language play we do know that the two coincide. From vocalizations of syllables to violations of conversational conventions, children play with language as they master language. Although play occurs in many animals, play with language is a uniquely human behavior.

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